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ABSTRACT

Genre studies are offered as a needed alternative to the historical approach to the study of public speaking. Five ways to classify rhetorical genres are suggested: (1) by the changes which messages produce in audiences, (2) by the dominant methods or characterizing strategies of a message, (3) by style, (4) by culture or world view, and (5) by form in its widest sense. Several examples of courses that could be constructed in each of these divisions are provided. A brief discussion of some of the kinds of genres not worth study concludes the paper. (TO)

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An Alternative for Retention: Genre Studies and Speech Communication

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A paper presented at the CSSA meeting in Milwaukee, April 1974

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My paper will be briefer than I envisioned when our able chairman invited me to participate on today's panel. At that time, I imagined that my role would be akin to the second affirmative: I would apply the coupe de grace to the status quo, or to whatever Professor Mahood had left of it for me, and then I would present "the plan:" genre studies as the salvation of public address. Instead, I believe I find myself more in the role of declaring a fait acompli. The wrinkle is this: it seems to me that the genre approach is very much a part of the present scene; indeed, it may be as good as any other rubric for describing the focus of our curricula.

One could test that generalization empirically by a survey of college catalogues. I leave a thorough proof of that sort to other, more compulsive hands. But I must admit that I peaked at the graduate and undergraduate catalogues of the Big Ten and selected other institutions. My conclusion is that course titles such as "Black Rhetoric," "Rhetoric of Social Movements," "Southern Oratory," "Judicial Advocacy," "The Rhetoric of Campaigns and Revolutions," "The Rhetoric of Religion"--in short, titles that center on kinds of discourse rather than its history--that these courses predominate.

One should not be surprised if this trend extends beyond the schools I consulted, for our publications have clearly foreshadowed the drift. Consider, for example, the possibility that the real news of Ed Black's book was not his autopsy of moribund neo-Aristotelian criticism, that it was instead his genre treatment of exhortative discourse and the genre of argumentation.[1] Consider further the work of our own Peck's Bad Boy, Larry Rosenfield: his work on Rosemary's Baby--George Wallace[2]--his study of Truman and Nixon,[3] and his more recent sally in pornography[4] are each concerned with types of discourse, i.e. genres. (How much Rosenfield might have benefited from Ware and Linkugel's fine QJS piece on analogic criticism one can only speculate.[5]) Let me last

mention two disparate but original recent texts on rhetorical analysis: Karlyn Kohrs Campbell's Critiques of Contemporary Rhetoric[6] and Irving J. Rein's Rudy's Red Wagon.[7] Behind each of these provocative books lurk Northrup Frye's seminal notions on genre criticism.[8] Again, my point is merely that our public address curricula reflect what's going on among criticism's active lights. I am secure enough in this conclusion that I have abandoned the intended assault on history's muse.

Rather, if I may deliver you a partition, I would first suggest the garden where he who has yet to discover the role of genre studies in the public address curriculum might search for specimens; second, some suggestions on distinguishing toadstools from mushrooms, or what kind of genres may not be worth further study.

I

Let us try our hand then at this question: What should be the genres of our research and curricula, or What congregations of similarities are worth study? I have a few recommendations in this direction. Let me suggest five ways by which we might divide the world of discourse with the hope that the divisions would generate descriptive, explanatory, evaluative and reliable information about man as a symbol user.

First, we might look for similarities in changes which messages produce in audiences. I mean such basic changes as those of information level, perception, belief, attitude, and overt action. To be sure, man is unitary; discourse that produces one sort of change is almost always associated with some other shift. Still, I think we can agree that there are messages that bear most directly on beliefs; that there are others that send us off to the recruiting station; that some leave our emotions untouched and behavior unchanged and so on. If we select a genre system of this sort, we are placing a premium on the personal functions of discourse: our system asks in what ways we are changed or shaped by our participation in the communication process?

Second, recognizable and potentially valuable genre similarities are cached in the dominant methods or characterizing strategies of a message. Behavioral researchers have for years now examined the impact of fear or so-called threat appeals. Ed Black, in the other direction, has written effectively on a genre he describes as "relatively reasonable discourse."[9] I do not envision a course in "adversive pathos" nor one even on that overly debated enthymene. But I could see a course that selects speeches that are distinguished for their use of evidence and reason, and in the same department, a course that selects speeches of dubious argument, bereft of evidence,

and reliant upon tactics that most of us would consider self-serving and unethical--in short, a course in demagogic rhetoric.

A system based on strategies presents problems. Some strategies are more worthy of study than others: they may occur with greater frequency or with greater rhetorical potency or may be associated with larger issues. And let it be recognized that each of us carry a notion of what a strategy is, depending upon whether we are Burkean, Aristotelian, and so on. But whether we are looking for identification strategies, or for intrinsic ethos, almost any method that employed rhetorical techniques as the taxonomic principle would be superior to one based on the calendar.

Next consider a related domain: style. Can we agree that styles are verbal congregations such as might be labled compulsive, papal, ingratiating, puritan, and metaphysical? I know recently when asked to define my own interests I found that "sensational rhetoric" seemed to be a useful rubric and one that spoke to stylistic or tonal commonalities. Alas, the label subsequently was distorted in the press and I was described as a sensitivity trainer. I received two inquiries that evening to conduct sessions. For the first time in my life, I felt consubstantial with Richard Nixon. More seriously, whether we see style as thing unto itself or as an aspect of strategy, as rhetoricians we ought to be able to make reliable distinctions between patterns of language management; and those patterns ought to have behaviorial or public consequences, that is, they ought to explain the impact of language.

Now allow me to recommend a genre system I shall label cultural although the more cumbersome "world view" might serve us better. Think now of whatever is meant by Third World Rhetoric, Black Power Rhetoric, Southern Oratory, or Nazi propaganda. I do not mean the history of these groups, but rather their distinctive characterizing rhetorical attributes, those matters and aspects

of discourse that spring as much from a group's perspective on the world as from the goals or the topics of its rhetoric. Example. When Malcolm X spoke against Jews in his autobiography, it is not the same transaction that occurs in the racist rhetoric of Hitler or George Lincoln Rockwell. Sartre might find all three anti-semitic; but Malcolm's is Poor Black antisemitic rhetoric. It reflects the interface of the ghetto and the pawnshop; it does not invent imaginary Elders of Zion nor, ala Rockwell, does it lament Kosher stamps on antifreeze. It has the nuances of Black, masculine discourse all about it.

Last, consider <u>form</u> in its widest sense -- embracing situation -- as a reasonable and informative basis on which to classify rhetorical genres. Here I refer to such objects of critical inquiry as movements, legislative debates, revivals, campaigns, and confrontations. These are clearly rhetorical phenomena with distinctive shapes, identifiable patterns, the study of which may allow us to evaluate past events and perhaps even predict the course of Impeachment.

II

As we have already noted, some genres are juicier than others. And at this point I should like to remark on three varieties that probably have no place in a public address curriculum.

The first are genres that are so inclusive that they offer very little rhetorical focus. British Eloquence and American Public Address come to mind. Let me allow for an exception. If someone, such as Andrews at Indiana, can offer a course the outcome of which is an understanding of what is <u>American</u> about American public address, then I don't care if his method is historical, his objective is generic, and his findings are likely to be rhetorically useful. All my instincts tell me that that is rarely the case; such courses usually result in information that is allegedly historically valuable.

The second sort of genres that are to be eschewed are those which are too exclusive. That almost by definition makes such specimens non-generic;

but I await a course on Davy Crockett's stump speaking in Eastern Kentucky on the cause of land grants. One man's trivia is another man's dissertation.

The exercise of common sense and the power of curriculum committees will often suffice to prevent errors of breadth and narrowness. However there remains still the danger of selecting genres for which the situation routine is so well established and so controlling that little rhetorical news can be extracted from them. By this criterion, I should imagine that nominating speeches and most inaugural addresses would not merit further study. We might want to include representative specimens in a survey course of great orations--for some have been eloquent--but surely the contents and strategies of such speeches could be discovered, indeed, predicted by an utterly untutored student. But here, too, let me confess to an aggravating exception. Without knowledge of each others work, some years ago Barnett Baskerville and I examined Joe McCarthy's Lincoln Day 1950 speech. Pundits had already judged it historically significant: it was considered by the left and the right alike as the opening blast of the McCarthy era or "Joe's Fight Against the Reds." Well, what could be more routinized than party day oratory? And, to be sure, McCarthy followed the prescribed form: he invoked Abe Lincoln and God; he viewed with alarm (but since his party was the "outs" he could not point with pride); and even his inaccurate expose of Reds-in-High-Places was a predictable topic; almost every Lincoln Day orator touched on that theme; Alger Hiss had just been sentenced a few weeks prior. But despite the ritual triteness of McCarthy's situation, Baskerville found news: it was in part from his study of this speech that he isoloted the phenomenon that came to be labeled BRIEF CASE DEMAGOGUERY or the ILLUSION OF PROOF.[10] One can observe much the same strategy at work in the rhetoric of George Lincoln Rockwell; the dead American Nazi was in the habit of waving documents, books, clippings and the like before his audience; my southern informants tell me that Big Jim Garrison operates in much the same manner.

In sum, then, rhetorical news can be gleaned from cliched situations. McCarthy's trick puts us wise. But such payoffs from cliches are rare, and they can be produced by dissertations and articles and surely do not merit a major place in the curriculum.

In conclusion, I must confess that in my own courses I have drawn, in the mode of the Chinese menus, some from Column A and some from Column B, and some from C. Thus we offer a course based on strategies (the Rhetoric of Demagoguery); one concerned with form (the Rhetoric of Religious Revivals); and a cultural genre (Nazi propaganda). Other offerings in the department center on movements and situations. Each of these courses strikes a balance between the interests and competencies of the instructor and what we perceive to be valuable intellectual material for the student. Perhaps without knowing it we have accepted the two key assumptions of genre studies: that general or nearly lawful knowledge can be gained by considering objects which share a wide band of similarities; and that such knowledge is superior to the specific.

END NOTES

1
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2
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B. Ware and Wil Linkugel, QJS ~~[illegible]~~ "They Spoke in Defense..." 59 (October 1973), 273-83.

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Karlyn K. Campbell, Critiques of Contemporary Rhetoric, Belmont, 1972.

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Irving J. Rein, Rudy's Red Wagon, Glenview, 1972.

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9
Black, op. cit.

10
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